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AUTHOR Sawyer, Janet B.
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AVAILABLE FROM Janet B. Sawyer, English Department, California State University, Long Beach, California 90840 (as part of the SWALLOW VI publication)

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ABSTRACT

The belief that bilinguals are an asset to their country is not held by most bilinguals today, much less the general public. This paper describes on-going research into the discovery that many bilinguals conceal their linguistic skill in the home language when in an English-speaking environment, passing as English-speaking monolinguals. Data are presented on a number of covert bilinguals (bilinguals who conceal knowledge of the minority language when in a dominant-language setting), showing that they have native skill in the home language, having mastered its phonological and grammatical patterns as children. In addition, passive bilinguals (bilinguals who admit to understanding the minority language but maintain that they cannot speak it) were studied to prove they are equally competent in the home language. Various patterns of behavior occur within these two general categories. Researchers in bilingualism in the Southwest, where suppression of minority cultures and languages is commonplace, must not base data on self-reports by possible bilingual informants, since denial of competence is a common strategy among them. Bilingual teachers are needed for the emerging bilingual education programs and might prevent the creation of new generations of crippled bilinguals who regard their bilingualism as a liability rather than an asset. (Author/AM)

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Janet B. Sawyer

PASSIVE AND COVERT BILINGUALS --- A HIDDEN ASSET FOR A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

In a welcoming address at the 1970 Georgetown University Round Table on Bilingualism,[1] Robert Lado spoke with great enthusiasm about the state of our nation with regard to Bilingual Education. I quote: "There has been a great cultural and linguistic growing-up of this great land, a maturation that could hardly have been thought possible fifteen years ago: the idea that bilingual education is important, that bilingualism is not a disease, that our bilinguals can and should be a great asset to this country. That maturation has not been confirmed through the passing by the Congress of the United States of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968".

Seven years later, what Professor Lado saw as achievements, seem better viewed as worthy goals for the future. My observations lead me to believe that the maturation that Professor Lado spoke of has not yet penetrated to the average citizen, and that the idea that bilingual education is important still remains the opinion of all too few. Unfortunately, the idea that bilingualism is a disease is also still with us, doing more damage than we may have relized. And the belief that our bilinguals can and should be a great asset to this country is not even held by most of the bilinguals themselves, much less the general public. The justification for these pessimistic statements will form the body of this paper.

Until the enactment of the Bilingual Education Act, there were no definite standards to measure education programs by, and the schools proceeded as best they could, operating on many principles that have proved to be misguided and non-productive. The focus of the classroom attack upon the

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1). p. xi, GURT, 1970

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education of non-English-speaking children was a single-minded drive to eradicate their home languages and turn them into monolingual speakers of English. The trouble with this idea was that it was not only unnatural but also impossible. The brain of a child has the innate capacity to acquire the language spoken in its immediate environment, the home, and the child has a basic need and desire to communicate with those it depends upon and loves. Once the home language is acquired, it remains in the child's brain, apparently forever, no matter whether it is used or not. And a child before the age of puberty can also acquire a second language or even a third with equal native production, if he himself feels the need to communicate in the additional systems, without in any way diminishing his capacity to use his first language.

Such facts were not understood until fairly recently. Earlier efforts to educate immigrant children were based upon the premise that non-English-speaking children must abandon their home language, at least in school, if they were ever to learn English. This misguided assumption was probably also a necessity in most classrooms, since few teachers understood the foreign languages their students spoke and the only means of communication was English. Yet what a traumatic situation this created for the child! Scarcely had he achieved competency in his mother tongue than he was thrust into an alien world where authoritative strangers whom he couldn't understand demanded that he cease to use his language and learn theirs--- an entirely new system of communication, which probably was not used by any of his loved ones in the home. It is no wonder that many children rejected these efforts, learning only enough English to get by, never achieving their potential of native proficiency in a second language. Many of them just "turned off" and became silent non-participants in the English-speaking

classrooms. It is also probable that many of these low-achievers continued to reject the English-speaking community as adults. It is just such people that were the subject of a recent survey conducted by the Los Angeles School system. The survey was part of the preparation for a Standard Oral English Program designed to improve the English of the Mexican-American population. Businessmen were asked to comment upon the features which they found most objectionable in the English of their employees. The investigators expected comments on the workers' accents or their errors in grammar. But these problems were seldom mentioned. Instead, the employers said that they objected most of all to the way the Mexican-American workers answered questions in mono-syllables, generally only saying "yes" or "no". This lack of fluency and restricted communication made their bosses feel that the workers were uninterested, negative, or, worst of all, antagonistic. Such habits were probably formed in childhood, in the English language classrooms, and had become automatic whenever they were in an English-speaking setting. People who are only marginally capable of using English remain marginal participants in our society, a terrible waste of human talents. Hopefully the teaching approach which produced such behavior will soon be only a memory.

But we must be fair. Not all children failed to respond in the English language classrooms; those who were highly motivated and prodded by an ambitious parent aware of the value of learning English perfectly, did become competent in English and subsequently entered the English-speaking community. We wondered what had happened to them, since so few of them were in our college classrooms.

We did not find the answer to the puzzle until fairly recently, when we began to make plans to implement the provisions of the Bilingual Education

Act, which promised so much to remedy the mistakes of the past. What was needed immediately for the success of the new programs was a large supply of teachers with bilingual skills. Particularly for the elementary grades, we wanted bilingual teachers who came directly from the minority cultures because they could communicate effectively with the children in their home languages during the years spent acquiring English. It came as a tremendous surprise to discover that at Cal State University, Long Beach there were very few bilingual students ready and willing to seize the opportunity to acquire a credential in Bilingual Education. Where were those highly motivated students who had become competent in English, in addition to their mother tongue? It was essential to find them, for they were the key to the new approach, a change in direction and in emphasis. If the children were to receive part of their school education in their home language, bilingual teachers were a necessity.

It was not unusual to find, in our linguistics classes, students with Spanish, Japanese or Chinese surnames. And it was a common practice, in the introductory courses, to make a special effort to identify those who knew languages other than English, since such knowledge is a very valuable asset for prospective linguists. As we know most American students are linguistically handicapped in language study by the fact that they are monolinguals. Bilingual students are urged to study their home languages and give reports on interestingly different systems, in order to enrich the experience of the class. Yet again and again, I have been told by likely prospects for such reports, that they do not speak or understand the language in question, even though they do admit that their parents speak it. Others said that they understand it a little, but cannot speak it. Still others

recoil in embarrassment and say that, although they do speak it at home, the language is "incorrect", "mixed", or "corrupt", therefore it cannot be considered worthy of study---not being a real language at all.

Yet when a student can be persuaded to make a study, say of the intonation system, or phonological system of his mother tongue, wonderful things happen. First of all, in a demonstration of the sound system, a student who previously claimed no knowledge of the language, will delight in demonstrating his ability to produce strange sounds or different intonations patterns. Then when the other students become very much interested and impressed by what he has to say, the bilingual student begins to enjoy himself, feeling a new respect for the language of his family. One can see a change in his behavior in the classroom as a result. Instead of being silent, tentative, non-communicative, he becomes a more confident, positive individual, realizing at last that bilingualism can be an asset. Such changes have occurred again and again, so they should have brought me some insight into the mystery of the "vanished bilinguals". Also I should have realized that perhaps some of the students who denied knowledge of another language were deceiving me. But all I understood then was that I was witnessing the effects of the prejudice of American Society, the belief that, as Robert Lado said, "Bilingualism was a disease." Apparently, many of the bilinguals in our classes believed that this was really true.

Understanding and enlightenment finally came from several of the students in the Graduate Program in Linguistics. The first informant that I wish to tell you about was an unusually capable boy who did excellent written studies in all of the courses, but was exceedingly quiet in class. He had a Spanish name, yet he claimed that he could not speak or understand any

Spanish. Nevertheless, he took the Seminar in Bilingualism, but, for more than a month, he revealed no knowledge of any language except English. However, for his major report, he surprised everyone by volunteering to do a study of a Spanish-English-speaking uncle, who was an avid code-switcher. I protested mildly, worried because he would find it difficult to work with natural speech, not knowing Spanish. He said nothing by way of explanation, and when his turn came to report on his research, he played a tape containing a conversation between two Spanish speakers, obviously both native in the language. One of them was the uncle, the other was himself, our self-styled English "monolingual"! This was a mind-blowing moment, because all of the students realized that he had been hiding his linguistic skills from all of us for years. From that moment on, he took a new position of authority in the class, since other monolingual students envied him for his knolwedge and sought his help with their own projects. He made contributions that were indicative of his creativity and intelligence and became an asset in the class. It is sad to think how damaging the concealment of his bilingualism had been to him personally.

I still did not realize that many other students were also concealing their bilinguals skills, but I set out to study such behavior more thoroughly, labeling it Covert Bilingualism. Another informant, also a student in the program, showed me another side of this problem. She was the child of parents who were both speakers of Spanish and English. The father was very determined that his daughter would learn English expertly, and since he was convinced that the only way to go about it was to prevent her from learning any Spanish, he issued the edict, which he enforced by every means possible, that she was not to speak any Spanish, nor was anyone to speak it to her. This was very difficult, since many of the relatives spoke only

Spanish and the family lived in a Spanish-speaking barrio. My informant remembers hearing relatives and friends conversing with her parents in Spanish, and she also recalls that her parents used Spanish as a secret language when they didn't want her to understand them. She told us about a visit to relatives in Texas during which everyone sat in silence in the living room staring at her, unable to speak to her because they knew only Spanish. The informant recounted all these experiences to the students in the Bilingual Seminar, explaining that as a result of her father's efforts, she was not a child bilingual, since she had not spoken any Spanish until she was a teenager, after the death of her father. Yet her Spanish was and is completely native, with no accent or errors in grammar that would be expected of an adult second-language learner. For some time we tried to solve this paradox. Either she was wrong and had learned Spanish as a child, or the theory of first and second language acquisition was in error. Finally, in answer to the question as to how she could be so sure she had not learned Spanish as a child, she said, "Because, when I began speaking it to my girl friends, I didn't have enough words at first, and when I talked it for a long time, my whole face would ache, all the muscles would hurt."

And that was the answer to the whole mystery! What she had experienced proved what linguists hold to be true----that a normal child does not have to speak a language in order to learn it and that he will acquire his mother tongue if he is simply exposed to it. In other words, a child cannot be prevented from learning the language spoken in his home, even if he never speaks it at all. This informant's face muscles hurt when she first began to speak Spanish, because they were different muscles from

those she used to speak English! Her brain and vocal organs had been completely programmed for Spanish phonology, and they knew just how to produce the distinctive phonological patterns of her mother tongue. The muscles ached because they were weak and needed to be used and strengthened.

Class discussions of this phenomena have turned up a number of formerly Covert Bilinguals. One of the papers presented at this conference, by Diane Lisi, recounts her experiences as a child. She was a victim of the old educational methods and the old beliefs, and is the best possible witness to the difficulty of surmounting such experiences. (This paper will appear in the proceedings of SWALLOW VI, 1977)

As the phenomenon called Covert Bilingualism became clearer, our next investigations concentrated upon those who claimed only passive knowledge of a foreign language. It was not really clear exactly what their linguistic ability might be. Was it possible that they, too, were true child bilinguals, and thus potential prospects as bilingual teachers and educators? Was their home language really only "half" a language? Was it not possible instead that they were deceived or that they were deceiving us because of the common assumption that immigrant languages were not respectable languages at all?

Students who label themselves as passive, non-speakers of their home language typically refuse to use the language. If they are spoken to in Spanish, they will answer in English. For this reason investigators have a difficult time assessing their true linguistic abilities. To overcome this problem a former student, Sally Morales, also a participant and speaker at SWALLOW VI, made an extended study of a group of Passive Bilinguals who were taking a class designed to make them literate in Spanish. The course, a regular offering in the community college curriculum, had other equally

beneficial results, as we shall see. On the first day of the class which Ms. Morales observed, not one word of Spanish was spoken by any of the twenty-five students. The instructor explained that he intended to interview each student to make sure that no monolingual Anglos had "sneaked in". So he asked a number of questions of each student in Spanish. All the answers were appropriate, however, not one student answered in Spanish... all answers were entirely in English. The instructor made no comment about this. Apparently such behavior was typical. Nor did he ever suggest that anyone speak Spanish in class. But he continued to use it himself in conducting the class. As the semester progressed, the class studied orthographical patterns in Spanish and certain grammatical features of formal written Spanish, as well as regional and nonstandard variants of vocabulary and grammar. Almost imperceptably, the students began to use Spanish instead of English during class discussions. And finally, they were able to use Spanish throughout the period without embarrassment. Their Spanish was natural, idiomatic, native Spanish, without any evidence of that "corruption" they so often speak of. Here again was evidence that the students in that class, at least, were true child bilinguals, equally proficient in both English and Spanish. Apparently they were reluctant to use their home language at first because they had been trained not to use it in school.

It seems probable that a large number of skilled bilinguals are hiding under the label "Passive", and underrating their valuable linguistic skills.

Research in Passive and Covert Bilingualism has continued, and evidence is mounting that our original informants were a true mirror of the present situation. Ms. Gloria McCullough is presently engaged in an extensive study

of this phenomena and she has discovered new aspects of behavior, which she described for you in a paper given at this conference. We have every reason to suspect that Passive and Covert bilinguals can be found not only on college campuses but in other areas where English is dominant. Yet the only mention that I have been able to find in the literature is in A Handbook of Bilingual Education, (Troike and Saville, pg. 21) speaking of the child's first days in school, they state "It is not uncommon to find children from Spanish-speaking homes denying that they know any Spanish, since the repression of the language in school and the generally subordinate status of Spanish speakers have made them ashamed of their linguistic and cultural heritage."

As such evidence mounts, we realize that studies of bilinguals in the Southwest must not be based upon self-reports by the bilinguals themselves. Nor can we assume that a person is not a bilingual, simply on his word alone. That is, we cannot build either linguistic theories or educational policies upon the answers to questions such as, "Do you speak any languages other than English?" Too many of our covert bilinguals say "No".

Although most of our research at present has been directed toward the Spanish-speaking minority, it appears that another minority in California, the Japanese-Americans, manifest an even greater degree of linguistic supression. We have heard of children who cannot speak the language of their parents, and children who ridicule their relatives' efforts to speak English, passing them off as maids, when American friends come to visit. For example, one of our students, a Japanese girl, tells a curious tale. She and her two brothers spent their childhood alone with their Japanese-speaking mother, because their father, who spoke both Japanese and English, was interned for several years in a detention camp. When he returned, we

must assume that he spoke Japanese to his wife until his death, since even today she knows almost no English. Yet the three children, all still living at home, speak only English and have great difficulty communicating with their mother. Apparently they find her efforts to speak English very amusing and thus the mother has no one she can talk to. These children must have learned Japanese when they were small, so the only explanation for this linguistic schizophrenia seems to be that the children found it so painful to be Japanese and to speak Japanese that they blocked out the childhood language altogether. It is nice to be able to add a positive note to this story. Just this year, the two brothers enrolled in a class in Japanese, and they are now fluent enough to talk to their mother in her language. Yet the girl still speaks only English and understands no Japanese.

The increasing number of such cases provides us with at least a tentative definition of the terms Covert and Passive Bilingual. The terms are fairly self-explanatory. Covert Bilinguals know two languages, one dominant and one minority language; the dominant language and culture suppresses the minority language and culture. The Covert Bilingual conceals his knowledge of the minority language in all English-speaking settings, passing as a dominant language monolingual. The Passive bilingual admits understanding of the minority language but no ability to speak it. We have seen various aspects of this behavior. Most Covert bilinguals speak the minority language at home. Some may be Covert in English-speaking communities and Passive at home. And, strange as it may seem, apparently under extreme conditions, for example among Japanese-Americans, it may be that the Covert bilinguals will remain Covert even at home with parents who speak the minority language, unwilling or incapable of even understanding it.

Aside from the significance of this phenomena for bilingual education, there is the additional importance for linguistic research. Often, linguists are quite naive in dealing with the social aspects of language investigation. Research to determine the knowledge of foreign language speakers, the number of bilingual speakers in a community, or the presence of non-English speakers in the home must be conducted so that it does not rely mainly upon direct testimony of the minority informants. Obviously, they may not provide accurate data, under suppressive social conditions. It is even possible that some of our perfectly legitimate theories about language acquisition and language learning are being shaken by surprising linguistic abilities that do not seem to fit, but would be readily explainable if we knew the true linguistic history of the informants. For example, it is not unusual to find students in foreign language classes who attain the foreign phonological patterns without any interference although they claim no previous knowledge of the language (My children, who acquired Spanish natively as children were very successful in the Spanish classes, never explaining how they acquired such skill.) Then there are others such as one young man in our classes who challenged the theory that adults cannot master the phonology of a second language, always having a "foreign accent". He had no accent in Spanish, yet he maintained, for years, that he had not acquired it as a child. In fact none in his home spoke it, he said, and none in his neighborhood did either. His case really seemed to disapprove our theory until we met his mother at his Graduation. She spoke fluent Spanish!

Now let us return to the main thesis of this paper,---the importance of these hidden linguistic skills to our pluralistic community...

Until our bilinguals no longer feel it necessary to conceal their linguistic skills, it is hard to be very optimistic about our society. However, I feel that we should continue our efforts to implement the goals and beliefs set forth by Professor Lado and make every effort to insure their realization. Bilingual educators know how important bilingual education is, and they know that bilingualism is not a disease. Yet even before we can hope to convince the average citizen of these truths, we must convince the bilinguals themselves of their self-worth and of the value of their linguistic skills and of the importance of the contribution that they can make to the education of new generations of children. Our Passive and Covert Bilinguals are the greatest asset we have in achieving our goal of bilingual education for all non-English speaking children. With or without government funding, we can still provide good education for them if we have enough well trained bilingual teachers. A number of the bilinguals that we have identified at Cal State are now competent, effective teachers in bilingual programs in this community. They represent a positive step toward the realization of the mature society envisioned in the 1970's.

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